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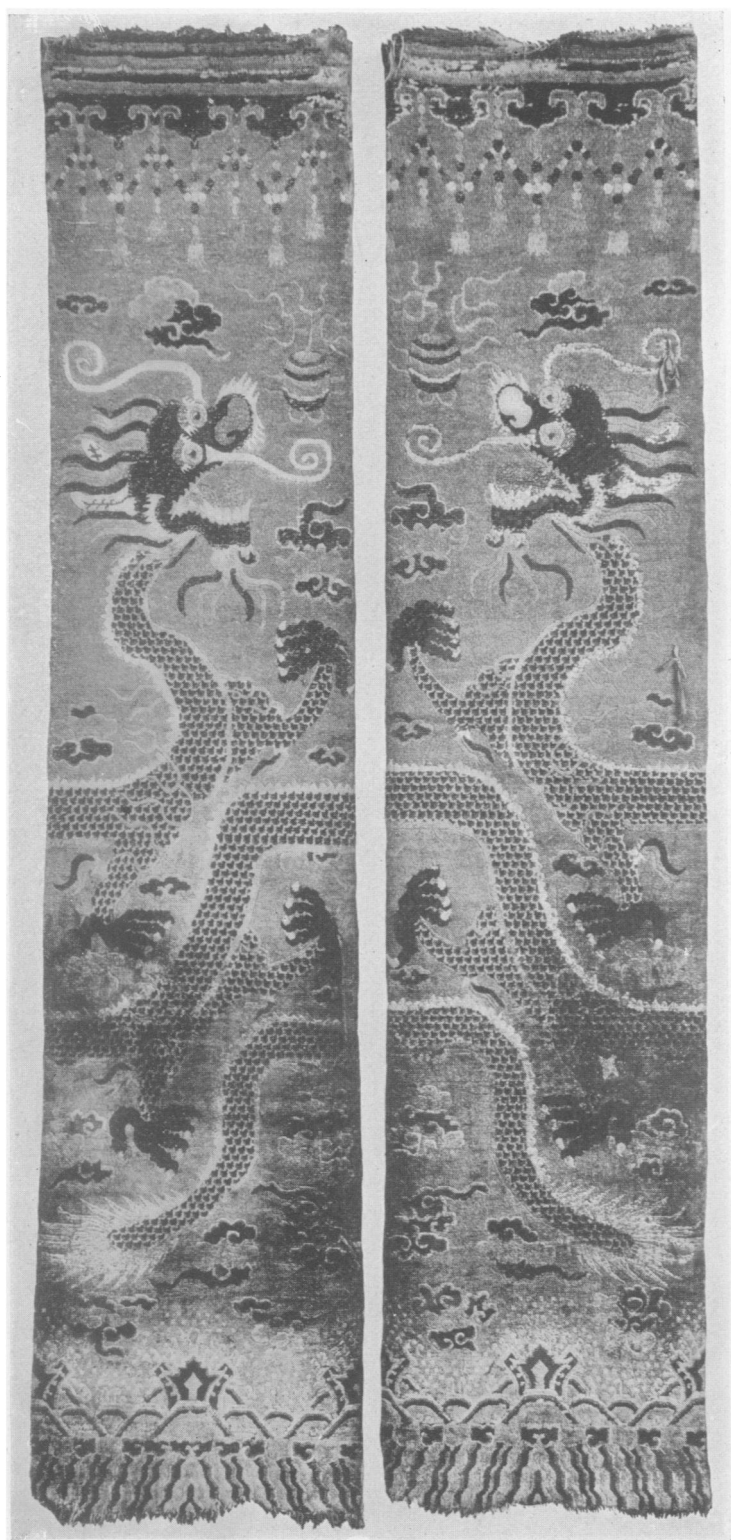
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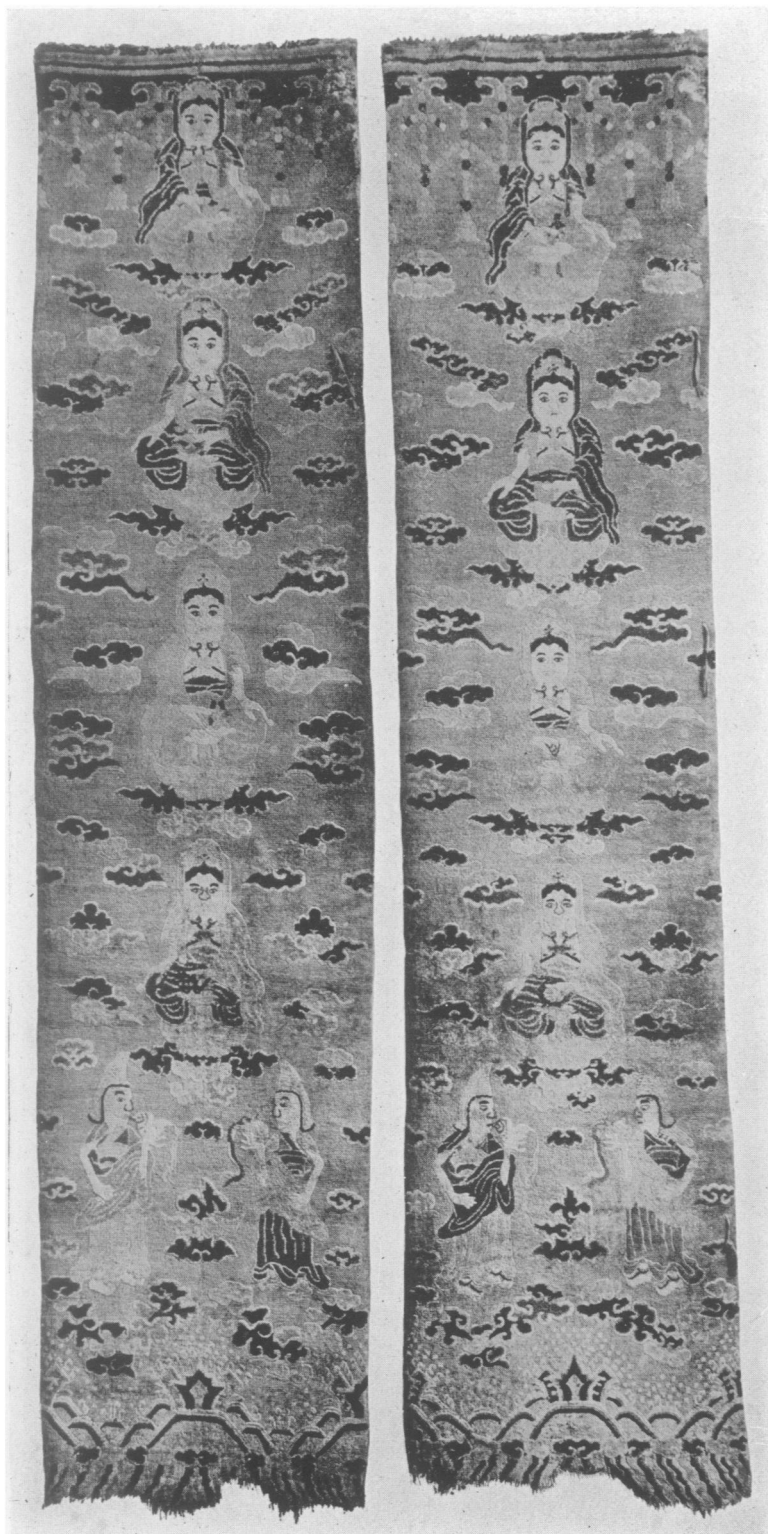
Mongolian Rugs of the Eighteenth Century

THE six Mongol pillar rugs illustrated in this issue of the Bulletin were purchased by the Museum in April, 1920, but have been known to rug collectors in this country and in China for several years. Of the several sets available for comparison, these are as old as any and include certain hitherto unrecorded designs. A pair in private ownership in New York are in better condition, as are those in the Victoria and Albert Museum, but the missing parts of our recent acquisition are merely a few square inches from the extreme bottom of two examples. The three pairs have been put on exhibition in the North corridor of the Museum, which is now being installed with the textile collection that was taken down from the West wing to make room for the stone temple colonnade from Madura.

While they are known as Mongol rugs, there can be little doubt that all the hangings of this type were produced for the Mongol church by the Chinese, probably the rug makers of Peking. In weave and wool and dye they correspond with the coarser work of the North Chinese weavers of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were bound about the wooden pillars of Mongol lamaseries or temples, and in several of the Museum examples the woolen lashings which bound them are still to be seen. This practice seems always to have existed in Buddhist temples of China and Chinese colonies, at least since the times when the pillars were no longer carved or painted. Possibly textile decoration for pillars superseded carving, which would account for the persistence of design, as these rugs could have been intended for no other purpose. In one pair at least, the pattern becomes meaningless when the rug is spread flat, for the dragons which coil about the pillar appear cut off in three separate pieces which meet exactly when the edges are joined. It is not known if Indian Buddhists covered the uprights of their chapels with cloth in the early periods, but the Tibetan church does today, and Mongolian Buddhism has from the first been an offshoot from Tibet. In Japan there are carved pillars showing a similar design of dragons and, in one or two cases, of rows of Bodhisattvas arranged vertically. In mediæval times paintings and lacquer designs were common in the richer monastic establishments, but stuffs woven expressly to be lashed about the pillars are unfamiliar. The hanging banners and strips which decorate the modern Japanese temples and often hide the posts cannot be construed into having any bearing on the subject.



MONGOL PILLAR RUGS



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The Chinese Huen Tsang, traveling to India in the first half of the seventh century, says that the pavilions of the monastery of Nelanda were upborne by pillars ornamented with dragons. However, our earliest available comparison is found in Korea, of the fifth century A. D., which was at the time intellectually if not politically a Chinese colony. The burial chambers of the kings, with their ante-chambers, have been uncovered from the mounds of earth which were heaped above them, and on the stone walls are fresco paintings. The doorway from the outer to the inner chamber in one of these royal tombs is flanked on either side by an octagonal column* on which are painted coiled dragons, no doubt in reminiscence of earlier carved uprights. The next step, particularly for nomad peoples, was to render



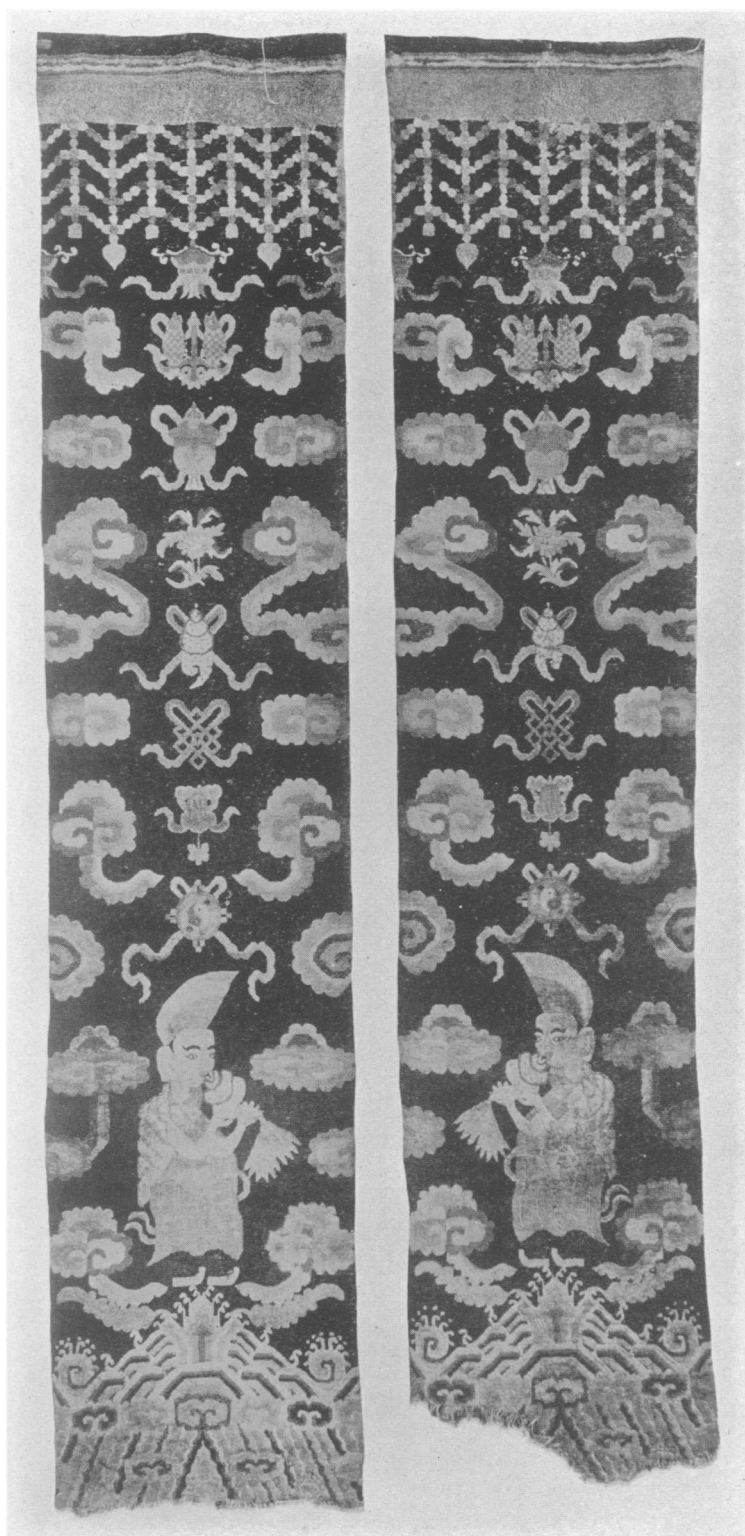
the same design for a similar purpose in a textile fabric to be lashed to the post.

To fill the gap between Korea of the fifth century, or even Huen Tsang in the seventh, and the partly Sinicised Mongolia of the late eighteenth, would mean research in India, on the trade route, in Turkestan and in Tibet. But without these links to demonstrate the actual parentage of our rugs enough has been said to suggest the line of their descent.

Technically they are not the equals of the fine Peking-made rugs of the early Ch'ing Emperors any more than any rug from China is technically the equal of the productions of the Near East. But for their purpose nothing could have been more appropriate. The dragon pair show great sprawling monsters seven feet high covered with blue scales. The background is become tawny orange, but originally contained more pink. Above the dragons' heads are strings of jewels and below them is Mount Sumeru around which dash the waves of the sacred sea, the spray falling in a decorative pattern about the summit. The second pair shows on a similar orange ground a vertical row of four Bodhisattva, each holding a sacred emblem, of which only two are distinguishable. About them are clouds in two shades of blue outlined in brown, below them on each rug are two erect figures of lamas, facing inward, one blowing on a conch shell and the other holding an offering. Below these figures is again the sacred mountain with waves and spray.

The third pair of rugs is perhaps the most striking of the three, for the background on which the figures appear is the rich blue which is to be found in the Chinese rugs of only the best period. In spite of the coarse weave and the somewhat long nap this dark blue loses nothing of its splendor. At the bottom, the mountain and rocks and

* See sketch in text.



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waves are drawn with something of the crispness which we see in more delicate carpets, and which suggests a period perhaps half a century earlier than that we have tentatively assigned to the series. Above them surrounded by flying clouds of larger and more flowing forms than on the other examples, stand the figures of two lamas blowing conch shells. They wear the great curving hats of wool and horsehair, shaped like classical helmets, which distinguish the Yellow Hat sect in Mongolia and in Tibet. Above hangs the conventional fringe of jewels.

L. W.